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Implementing Self-Access Language Learning in Non-English Major Classes

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently, colleges in Japan have been ranked according to the academic level of the students they accept. This no longer seems to be true, except for a few institutions. Students with different levels of competence and a variety of academic experiences flock into college classrooms. Their proficiency in foreign languages also varies. It is not rare to encounter students who were exposed to non-Japanese cultures in their younger days, attending schools in foreign countries where classes were conducted in English or other languages. In this environment, at the beginning of every academic year, I find a mixed-level audience with most students expecting me to instruct them on what and how to study, as in their high school days. The idea of teacher-directed learning is the common expectation which continues to prevail in the Japanese educational system.

Reports from research conducted in elementary, junior and high schools prove that an increasing number of students show a stronger emotional dependence on their teachers, less motivation to attempt new learning activities, and an unwillingness to use their creativity to take part in new projects. Whereas they claim they want to be independent in their private lives, they do not know how to achieve independence as human beings and lack a sense of responsibility appropriate for their age. These findings about education and school life at the primary and secondary levels give teachers in colleges and universities an updated view of the variety of "clientele" they will have in their classes. Teachers are left with the task of designing a course or curriculum that meets the diverse cultural, psychological and personal characteristics of the learners and their individual academic abilities. Strategies must also be considered to help students become autonomous learners and individuals while performing assignments in the classroom.

In recent years, students with marked academic differences are placed together in the same English class in colleges. Wishing to find more about how they varied in language learning progress when different strategies of self-access language learning were employed, I conducted for one school term a project with 2 non-English major groups of 30 and 32 students, both female and male. One course was elective with learners ranging from freshmen to seniors from different departments, and the other course was required for the majority of students of the same school year and same department. In both courses emphasis would be given to the development of speaking and listening English skills. Not to cause too much of a turmoil in the class or to intimidate the students with a 90-minute lesson where they had to practice English using a completely unknown system, I decided to conduct 30 to 40 minutes of general classwork in the traditional way and then incorporate self-access language learning in the latter part of the class. My goal was to make

students aware of the need to improve their English skills in a productive and comfortable manner while still taking responsibility for their learning. Through their classroom work, I also hoped the students would indirectly develop a sense of responsibility as people.

I. Preparing Students for Self-Access Language Learning

When presenting the course description, I told my students we were going to cover, in a traditional way, the teaching materials already decided by the department in charge of the course and by me. However, at the same time, I wanted to work with them in a flexible way, allowing them to learn and practice the kind of language they actually need and want. This project would be limited to developing speaking and listening skills. Reading and writing would be components in the study process. I did not use the terms autonomy or independence as I wanted to eliminate any misconception that independence meant license to engage in noisy behavior or chatting with their friends in Japanese.

Finding and Establishing Learning Styles

Aware that there is learner resistance towards autonomy, as reported by Sinclair and Ellis (1984), I first gave a short questionnaire designed to elicit student beliefs and attitudes on ways to learn English better, and to determine which learning styles they preferred. The original questions are accompanied here by the results in percentages.

How I think I can learn English better

	Learners in the elective course		Learners in the required course	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
(*Some students chose not to answer to some statements.)				
1. Working alone at my own pace.	53	13	21	37
2. Working with a partner.	40	33	21	31
3. Working in a small group.	30	20	25	28
4. Learning only from the teacher.	00	100	15	75
5. Working with a partner or doing group work with the teacher available for consultation.	56	6	46	15
6. Working without constant teacher supervision.	16	70	25	62
7. Working with student(s) who are at about the same English language level as myself.	90	0	71	15
8. Engaging in speaking activity I select.	83	10	62	21
9. Engaging in listening activity I select.	83	6	62	15

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10. Engaging in speaking activity assigned by the teacher.	86	6	68	9
11. Engaging in listening activity assigned by the teacher.	86	6	71	12

Using the results of the questionnaire, I composed a chart with the learners who wished to work individually, in pairs or in groups. To those who believed they would learn better if learning only from the teacher, I explained how different the self-access learning approach was and the benefits of experiencing it. At the beginning some were hesitant, having never been trained to work in that system, and some understood that working in class might frustrate their wish to relax during most of the 90-minute lecture. But they all finally agreed to try it.

II. Designing and Implementing Self-Access Learning

a. *Presentation of Tasks*

I prepared enough speaking and listening activities, exercises and materials to allow the learners to make their choice, considering what they wanted and needed. I clarified that not everything they wanted was what they needed, and that their wishes and needs were open to negotiation with me.

The following activities were given to the students.

Speaking Activities

1. Situational conversations such as take place when shopping, ordering at a restaurant, asking for directions, riding public transportation, etc. Students read the model dialogs provided, check the unfamiliar vocabulary, then write out their conversations and practice, memorize and tape record their role-plays.
2. Situational conversations using language functions such as starting a conversation, agreeing and refusing, complaining, etc. Students follow the same procedure as in activity number one.
3. Solving problems. Letters of consultation as those in the Ann Landers newspaper column are provided. Students check the unfamiliar vocabulary, discuss, prepare solutions, practice and tape record their suggestions.
4. Discussing topics. Problems on a variety of topics are provided. Students study a topic, check the unfamiliar vocabulary, discuss, and prepare a formal presentation of their ideas, tape recording them.
5. After taking a short excursion outside the classroom, students return to the class, prepare their observations and, after practicing them, tape record them.
6. Using the telephone. Models of both business and personal calls are given. Learners write out their own telephone calls, including openers and closers and other language functions. They practice and tape record their role-plays.
7. Memorizing social rituals which involve short conversations frequently repeated in everyday situations. These ritualistic conversations rarely convey much real information. They are composed of short sentences in a very limited number of exchanges. Everyone uses them when handling situations such as apologizing, both giving and receiving compliments, offering

congratulations, accepting a gift, etc. Learners memorize the conversations and tape record their role-plays. (I should note that the situational conversations in activity number 2 are of a different nature and contain a more extended exchange of information.)

8. Interviews. Students prepare their own list of questions, practicing and memorizing them. One student interviews another. When the interview is finished, the learners reverse roles. The interviews are tape recorded.

Note: The students were instructed that in the final stage of their practice, in the tape recording of the presentation or role-play, they were not allowed to read their manuscripts.

Listening Activities

1. General daily tape-recorded conversations are accompanied by printed exercises to practice and reinforce listening comprehension, and expand vocabulary. Learners listen to the tape and work on the exercises. The procedure can be repeated as many times as the learners wish. When they are convinced they have done their best, they turn in their work sheets.

2. Telephoning in English. Tape recorded general and business telephone conversations are accompanied by exercises to check comprehension and expand vocabulary. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

3. Narratives. Tape recordings and printed comprehension questions are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

4. Mini-dramas. Tape recordings and printed comprehension questions and parts of scripts to be completed are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

5. Lectures on world issues. Tape recordings of lower intermediate level materials are provided together with comprehension questions. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

6. Songs. Tape recordings and exercises to expand vocabulary are provided with sheets to complete the words of songs. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

7. Short reading passages on a variety of topics. Tape recordings and exercises to check comprehension and expand vocabulary are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

8. Five-minute quizzes for TOEIC. Tape recordings and work sheets are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

Note: 1. For many of the listening activities, a transcription exercise was provided to practice precise comprehension.

2. Students engaged in listening activities 1, 2 and 7 were told they could, after completing their practice, undertake speaking activities, creating and presenting their own conversations following the models in 1 and 2, and writing and presenting their opinions for activity 7. If opting to do these speaking activities, they would have to work in pairs for activities 1 and 2, and in pairs or groups of up to 3 students for activity 7.

A brief explanatory session followed, to make sure the learners understood how they would work and to clarify any problems they may have. I instructed them to set their learning goals after choosing their activity/ies.

b. Organizing Physical Setting and Resources

After discussions about what the students wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it, I explained that we needed some equipment, that is, small, palm-size audio-recorders, and that I counted on their cooperation. When I surveyed how many owned one, almost everybody raised their hands. I instructed them to bring their audio equipment to class. Those who were going to engage in listening should have each a cassette player. Those engaging in speaking activities should have one tape recorder per individual, pair or group (of no more than 3 people). I would provide them with the cassette tapes. As the literature on self-access learning explains, involving the students in providing the resources needed is a way of making them feel that they have ownership in their learning process. I hoped I was instilling some learner motivation by applying that strategy.

The next step was to involve the students in decisions about how we would rearrange the classroom. I wanted to make them feel and understand that the reorganization of the classroom in the best possible way was part of the negotiation for creating a self-access language learning environment.

Studies in self-access learning state that the classroom needs to be easy to organize. That point had to be carefully addressed since I had incorporated self-access into the "regular" traditional lesson. The classroom had to be converted into a setting quickly and easily so that the students could participate in an effective way. Since we would be undertaking only speaking and listening activities, and individual listening would be done using sets of earphones, I used the students engaged in listening as "partitions" to separate the pairs and groups working on speaking tasks.

c. Building Awareness of Self-Access Learning and Commitment to Classroom Study

When designing this project, I had two objectives in mind: 1. to initiate and train my students in self-access learning in their English language course, and 2. to make them aware of their role in that process. They had to realize that they, the students, and not I, the teacher, were the focus of the exercise and the decision-makers. My role would be restricted to that of a monitor. They had to learn to take responsibility for their progress. One major problem teaching non-English majors, especially a group composed of students taking that course as a required subject, was poor motivation. Naturally there were students interested only in getting credits. So I explained that self-access learning could be applied to other studies. Those most comfortable with teacher-directed learning were urged to try, see, and experience for themselves that both the teacher-directed and self-access learning were equally effective learning methods and could work well in combination. Self-access learning would be enjoyable, interesting and, perhaps, even relaxing, as they could work at their own pace. Whether that explanation was convincing or not remains to be seen, as no investigation into that issue was conducted.

Wishing to raise the students' consciousness about self-access learning, I made clear that they would be applying two basic strategies when working on their tasks: 1. understanding the meaning in English as fully as possible, and 2. practicing using English as much as possible. I would leave the processes they wished to apply entirely up to them, but I would be available to teach those who did not know how to practice the activity and to help those who wanted to have their pronunciation

corrected or the accuracy of their sentences checked.

The students were asked to complete sections 1 and 2 of the Learner Profile, after selecting the activity they would prefer to engage in. That Profile would then commit them to their chosen project.

LEARNER PROFILE

Name: _____ No. _____

1. Goal

My goal is: _____

2. Learning activities/materials

I will do the following things to achieve my goal:

Date	Activities · speaking (number) (names of partners) · listening (number)	Reason Doing this will help me:

3. Self-assessment

(Note: a. Comments can be written in Japanese.

b. Evaluation grades are A+, A, B, C or F.)

Date	Activity No.	Evaluation	Comments

I collected the Learner Profiles and checked each study plan. The students rearranged the classroom as planned. They were told I was always available for any counselling or consultation. In the latter part of every class, the students engaged one another in speaking and listening activities. Students who completed a task and wished to start a new one, were to come to me, pick up their Learner Profile, assess themselves on the finished work in section 3, and add the new activity in section 2.

d. Assessing Self-Access Learning

Self-access learning is like a coin with two faces. On one side lies the guidance on how to develop responsibility in self-access learning and the actual self-access learning itself. On the reverse side lies the process of making the students reflect about their learning through self-assessment. By being guided to assess themselves at the completion of a task, they can judge the value of the self-access activities they have engaged in.

Although I observed both poor and motivated behavior among the students, I nevertheless decided to treat them equally and encourage all of them to take more responsibility for their learning, providing an opportunity for reflection. The students working on oral activities listened to their final recording. Some preferred self-, others peer-assessments. To those engaged in aural activities, answer keys were given for self-scoring and assessments.

The literature on self-access learning assessments states that their main purpose is to encourage learner reflection and development; the nature of the assessments should be non-threatening and the results must remain private. Following that principle, I told the students that, since confidentiality would be observed, I expected them to be honest with themselves when doing their self-assessment. I also informed them that the results would contribute to statistical analyses for later improvement of that method when applied to future students. Their comments would not be made public by name and would only be used as a complement to my assessment of their work.

The following graph shows in percentages the students' attitudes after self- and or peer-assessment.

	Students in the elective course (%)	Students in the required course (%)
After performing speaking activities		
1. Students asked for my comments after listening to their recording.	76	15
2. Students asked me to correct their scripts.	90	18
3. Students did nothing beyond turning in their assessments on the Learner Profile.	10	81

After performing listening activities

1. Students scored their work against the answer keys.	100	100
2. Students scored their work against the answer keys and asked me to clarify portions of the tape recording they could not understand.	70	15

III. Evaluating the Implementation and Results of Self-Access Learning

Analyzing the Learner Profiles of the students in both elective and required courses shows that motivation and interest in self-access learning is higher among learners in the elective course. Although they were students of departments other than English, about seventy percent had the ability to engage in the activities with some facility and showed involvement in their practice. I was pleased to observe this attitude during my monitoring rounds. However, students in the required course did not show as much interest or motivation. About 80 percent of them completed the activities out of obligation during the class period reserved for self-access learning. The remaining 20 percent seriously committed themselves to the activities, like the students in the elective course.

The students' comments in section 3 of the Learner Profile provide valuable data on their experiences and feelings when they were engaged in self-access learning. In the hope that the students expressed their true feelings, I grouped the clearest and most frequent comments together for review below.

1. I like the idea of working on something I chose.
2. I enjoy working at my own pace.
3. I don't enjoy role-playing a conversation in front of other students. I always feel so nervous.
4. It is interesting that I can mark my own work
5. It is interesting that I can evaluate my work.
6. I like the idea that I can ask the teacher for help as in a private lesson. I think this will improve my abilities.
7. It was interesting to do something different from other students. I felt very independent.

The results in this study were very close to what I had expected. I have learned through my recent research projects that unreasonably high expectations lead to frustration. Unfortunately, decline in motivation has become a fact. A good number of students, even those with a relatively good command of English, and students who could improve if more effort were expended, lack the willingness to practice.

The implementation of self-access language learning gave to both the elective and required courses of this project a refreshing atmosphere. The choice to work on different activities created a feeling of independence in the class. To those students willing to tackle different or more difficult tasks, self-access learning allowed the opportunity for development as individual learners. Knowing that I was available any time for consultation gave the assurance that attention and care

were being given to them. I believe that this fact helped to increase the degree of motivation among the students.

The data in the Learner Profiles and my class observations tell me that self-access learning can be incorporated into English lesson planning without fear, and it would not be far-fetched to say that it never ends up in complete failure.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the past 50 years, the teaching of English as a foreign language has been conducted with the teacher directing the whole process. This was fully accepted and labelled as the most natural, common and recommended method by the majority of teachers and learners. This consensus even prevailed in learning settings involving a group of mixed learners. A high percentage of college students naturally agreed and accepted to engage in activities as a group. However, the accelerated demand to satisfy growing individual wants and needs in the present social and economic environment calls for changes in the educational system. Remedial action must be taken to deal with increased apathy in classroom learning. Although formerly submissive and passive Japanese students are gradually giving way to more assertive or aggressive individuals, socially, the majority still prefer to continue behaving in groups in the traditional way. In the classroom, teachers see the need to identify individual learning problems and to apply different strategies so that satisfactory learning goals can be achieved.

With diversity displacing unity, changes in teaching systems are a must. Self-access systems characterized by their flexibility are excellent tools, fit for the current generation and its needs. In order to provide a flexible learning context, the teacher needs to create situations in a classroom that provide a variety of choices able to fulfill the expectations of the students. In such an active atmosphere, students with low motivation are strongly influenced to acknowledge the need to take more responsibility for their learning when engaging in classroom activities. Later, assessing their self-access learning experience, the students see the importance of a habit of self-reflection which helps them redefine their goals as both learners and individuals.

As learners need to become more aware of their central role in the decision-making process in the learning context, and teachers need to understand their new roles as collaborators, the educational establishment should be aware that it has to provide teachers the support needed to promote the formation of autonomous young adults. While the teacher works on the construction and reconstruction of practices for the development of an autonomous context, the institution should work to create a more comfortable setting for the students to readjust their attitude to achieve maturity both as language learners and individuals. An interactive classroom context between the teacher and the learner cannot be realized without full support from the institution.

Implementation of self-access in the English learning program with a possible backup from the institution may not, however, be completely effective. Nunan explains that the fully autonomous learner is an ideal rather than a reality. He also argues for different degrees of learners' autonomy from one skill area to another. Examples of learners succeeding in the listening area but remaining dependent on the teacher in the speaking area often emerged in my research. Arguments over whether self-access learning is effective and efficient are irrelevant when we face the challenges of

an age of diversity. The goal of English language educators should be twofold: 1. to provide opportunities for different learners to use a range of learning methods to achieve improvement in one or more English skills, and 2. to, subsequently, enable them to handle practical language situations by the end of the course.

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